

Icelandic language

Icelandic (/ˈaɪsˈlændɪk/ (listen); Icelandic: *íslenska* pronounced [ˈistlɛnska] (listen)) is a North Germanic language spoken by about 314,000 people, the vast majority of whom live in Iceland where it is the national language.^[1] It is most closely related to Faroese and Western Norwegian.

The language is more conservative than most other Western European languages. While most of them have greatly reduced levels of inflection (particularly noun declension), Icelandic retains a four-case synthetic grammar (comparable to German, though considerably more conservative and synthetic) and is distinguished by a wide assortment of irregular declensions. Since the written language has not changed much, Icelanders are able to read classic Old Norse literature created in the 10th through 13th centuries (such as the *Eddas* and *sagas*) with relative ease.

Icelandic is closely related to Faroese; the written forms of the two languages are very similar, but their spoken forms are not mutually intelligible.^[3] It is not mutually intelligible with the continental Scandinavian languages (Danish, Norwegian, and Swedish) and is more distinct from the most widely spoken Germanic languages, English and German, than those three are.

Aside from the 300,000 Icelandic speakers in Iceland, it is spoken by about 8,000 people in Denmark,^[4] 5,000 people in the United States,^[5] and more than 1,400 people in Canada,^[6] notably in the region known as New Iceland in Manitoba which was settled by Icelanders beginning in the 1880s.

The state-funded Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies serves as a centre for preserving the medieval Icelandic manuscripts and studying the language and its literature. The Icelandic Language Council, comprising representatives of universities, the arts, journalists, teachers, and the Ministry of Culture, Science and Education, advises the authorities on language policy. Since 1995, on 16 November each year, the birthday of 19th-century poet Jónas Hallgrímsson is celebrated as Icelandic Language Day.^{[7][8]}

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<i>íslenska</i>	
Pronunciation	[ˈistlɛnska]
Native to	 Iceland
Ethnicity	 Icelanders
Native speakers	314,000 (2015) ^[1]
Language family	<div>Indo-European<ul style="list-style-type: none">Germanic<ul style="list-style-type: none">North Germanic<ul style="list-style-type: none">West Scandinavian<ul style="list-style-type: none">Insular Scandinavian<ul style="list-style-type: none">Icelandic</div>
Early forms	<div>Old Norse<ul style="list-style-type: none">Old West Norse<ul style="list-style-type: none">Old Icelandic</div>
Writing system	Latin (Icelandic alphabet) <div></div> Icelandic Braille
Official status	
Official language in	 Iceland
Regulated by	 Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies in an advisory capacity
Language codes	
ISO 639-1	is (https://www.loc.gov/standards/iso639-2/php/langcodes_name.php?iso_639_1=is)
ISO 639-2	ice (https://www.loc.gov/standards/iso639-2/php/langcodes_name.php?code_ID=198) (B) <div>isl (https://www.</div>

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Dictionaries

loc.gov/standards/iso639-2/php/langcodes_name.php?code_ID=198) (T)

ISO 639-3

isl

Glottolog

icel1247 (<http://glottolog.org/resource/languoid/id/icel1247>)^[2]

Linguasphere

52-AAA-aa



Iceland, where Icelandic is the language of the majority

History

The oldest preserved texts in Icelandic were written around 1100 AD. Many of the texts are based on poetry and laws traditionally preserved orally. The most famous of the texts, which were written in Iceland from the 12th century onward, are the Icelandic Sagas. They comprise the historical works and the eddaic poems.

The language of the sagas is Old Icelandic, a western dialect of Old Norse. The Dano-Norwegian, then later Danish rule of Iceland from 1536 to 1918 had little effect on the evolution of Icelandic (in contrast to the Norwegian language), which remained in daily use among the general population. Though more archaic than the other living Germanic languages, Icelandic changed markedly in pronunciation from the 12th to the 16th century, especially in vowels (in particular, *á*, *æ*, *au*, and *y/ý*).

The modern Icelandic alphabet has developed from a standard established in the 19th century, primarily by the Danish linguist Rasmus Rask. It is based strongly on an orthography laid out in the early 12th century by a document referred to as The First Grammatical Treatise by an anonymous author, who has later been referred to as the First Grammarian. The later Rasmus Rask standard was a re-creation of the old treatise, with some changes to fit concurrent Germanic conventions, such as the exclusive use of *k* rather than *c*. Various archaic features, as the letter *ð*, had not been used much in later centuries. Rask's standard constituted a major change in practice. Later 20th-century changes include the use of *é* instead of *je* and the removal of *z* from the Icelandic alphabet in 1973.^[9]

Apart from the addition of new vocabulary, written Icelandic has not changed substantially since the 11th century, when the first texts were written on vellum.^[10] Modern speakers can understand the original sagas and Eddas which were written about eight hundred years ago. The sagas are usually read with updated



A page from the *Landnámabók*, an early Icelandic manuscript.

modern spelling and footnotes but otherwise intact (as with modern English readers of Shakespeare). With some effort, many Icelanders can also understand the original manuscripts.

Legal status and recognition

According to an act passed by parliament in 2011, Icelandic is "the national language of the Icelandic people and the official language in Iceland"; moreover, "[p]ublic authorities shall ensure that its use is possible in all areas of Icelandic society".^[11]

Iceland is a member of the Nordic Council, a forum for co-operation between the Nordic countries, but the council uses only Danish, Norwegian and Swedish as its working languages (although the council does publish material in Icelandic).^[12] Under the Nordic Language Convention, since 1987 Icelandic citizens have had the right to use Icelandic when interacting with official bodies in other Nordic countries, without becoming liable for any interpretation or translation costs. The convention covers visits to hospitals, job centres, the police and social security offices.^{[13][14]} It does not have much effect since it is not very well known, and because those Icelanders not proficient in the other Scandinavian languages often have a sufficient grasp of English to communicate with institutions in that language (although there is evidence that the general English skills of Icelanders have been somewhat overestimated).^[15] The Nordic countries have committed to providing services in various languages to each other's citizens, but this does not amount to any absolute rights being granted, except as regards criminal and court matters.^{[16][17]}

Phonology

Icelandic has very minor dialectal differences phonetically. The language has both monophthongs and diphthongs, and consonants can be voiced or unvoiced.

Voice plays a primary role in the differentiation of most consonants including the nasals but excluding the plosives. The plosives *b*, *d*, and *g* are voiceless and differ from *p*, *t* and *k* only by their lack of aspiration. Preaspiration occurs before geminate (long or double consonants) *p*, *t* and *k*. It does not occur before geminate *b*, *d* or *g*. Pre-aspirated *tt* is analogous etymologically and phonetically to German and Dutch *cht* (compare Icelandic *nótt*, *dóttir* with the German *Nacht*, *Tochter* and the Dutch *nacht*, *dochter*).

Consonants

Consonant phones

		<u>Labial</u>	<u>Coronal</u>	<u>Palatal</u>	<u>Velar</u>	<u>Glottal</u>
<u>Nasal</u>		(<u>m</u>) <u>m</u>	(<u>n</u>) <u>n</u>	(<u>ɲ</u>) (<u>ɲ</u>)	(<u>ŋ</u>) (<u>ŋ</u>)	
<u>Stop</u>		p ^h <u>p</u>	t ^h <u>t</u>	(c ^h) (<u>c</u>)	k ^h <u>k</u>	
<u>Continuant</u>	<u>sibilant</u>		<u>s</u>			
	<u>non-sibilant</u>	<u>f</u> <u>v</u>	<u>θ</u> (<u>ð</u>)	(<u>ç</u>) <u>j</u>	(<u>x</u>) (<u>ɣ</u>)	<u>h</u>
<u>Lateral</u>			(<u>ɭ</u>) <u>ɭ</u>			
<u>Rhotic</u>			(<u>ɾ</u>) <u>ɾ</u>			

- /ɲ n ^h t/ are laminal denti-alveolar, /s/ is apical alveolar,^{[18][19]} /θ ð/ are alveolar non-sibilant fricatives;^{[19][20]} the former is laminal,^{[19][20]} while the latter is usually apical.^{[19][20]}

- The voiceless continuants /f s θ ç x h/ are always constrictive [f s θ ç x h], but the voiced continuants /v ð j ɣ/ are not very constrictive and are often closer to approximants [v ð j ɣ] than fricatives [v ð j ɣ].
- The rhotic consonants may either be trills [ʀ r] or taps [ɾ ɾ], depending on the speaker.
- A phonetic analysis reveals that the voiceless lateral approximant [ɭ] is, in practice, usually realized with considerable friction, especially word-finally or syllable-finally, i. e., essentially as a voiceless alveolar lateral fricative [ɬ].^[21]

Scholten (2000, p. 22) includes three extra phones: [ʔ ɭʷ ɭʷ].

Word-final voiced consonants are devoiced pre-pausally, so that *dag* ('day (acc.)') is pronounced as ['ta:x] and *dagur* ('day (nom.)') is pronounced ['ta:ɣʏɾ].^[22]

Many competing analyses have been proposed for Icelandic phonemes. The problems stem from complex but regular alternations and mergers among the above phones in various positions.

Vowels

Monophthongs

	<u>Front</u>		<u>Back</u>
	plain	round	
<u>Close</u>	i		u
<u>Near-close</u>	ɪ	ʏ	
<u>Open-mid</u>	ɛ	œ	ɔ
<u>Open</u>	a		

Diphthongs

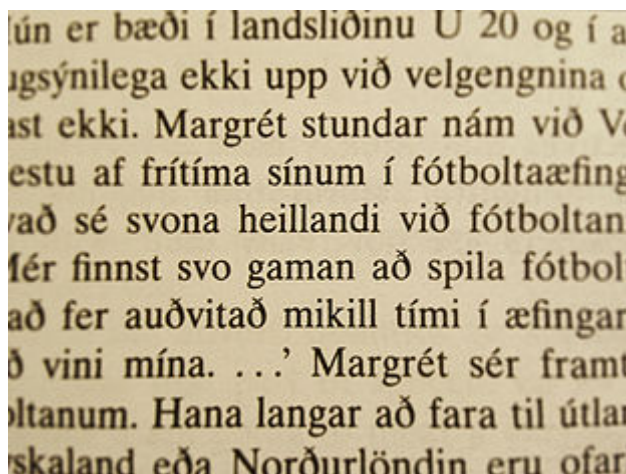
	<u>Front offglide</u>	<u>Back offglide</u>
<u>Mid</u>	ei • œi	ou
<u>Open</u>	ai	au

Grammar

Icelandic retains many grammatical features of other ancient Germanic languages, and resembles Old Norwegian before much of its fusional inflection was lost. Modern Icelandic is still a heavily inflected language with four cases: nominative, accusative, dative and genitive. Icelandic nouns can have one of three grammatical genders: masculine, feminine or neuter. There are two main declension paradigms for each gender: strong and weak nouns, and these are further divided into subclasses of nouns, based primarily on the *genitive singular* and *nominative plural* endings of a particular noun. For example, within the strong masculine nouns, there is a subclass (class 1) that declines with *-s* (*hests*) in the genitive singular and *-ar* (*hestar*) in the nominative plural. However, there is another subclass (class 3) of strong masculine nouns that always declines with *-ar* (*hlutar*) in the genitive singular and *-ir* (*hlutir*) in the nominative plural. Additionally, Icelandic permits a quirky subject, i.e. certain verbs have subjects in an oblique case (i.e. other than the nominative).

Nouns, adjectives and pronouns are declined in the four cases and for number in the singular and plural. T-V distinction (*þérun*) in modern Icelandic seems on the verge of extinction, but it can still be found, especially in structured official address and traditional phrases.

Verbs are conjugated for tense, mood, person, number and voice. There are three voices: active, passive and middle (or medial), but it may be debated whether the middle voice is a voice or simply an independent class of verbs of its own (because every middle-voice verb has an active ancestor but concomitant are sometimes drastic changes in meaning, and the middle-voice verbs form a conjugation group of their own). Examples are *koma* ("come") vs. *komast* ("get there"), *drepa* ("kill") vs. *drepast* ("perish ignominiously") and *taka* ("take") vs. *takast* ("manage to"). In each of these examples, the meaning has been so altered, that one can hardly see them as the same verb in different voices. Verbs have up to ten tenses, but Icelandic, like English, forms most of them with auxiliary verbs. There are three or four main groups of weak verbs in Icelandic, depending on whether one takes a historical or a formalistic view: *-a*, *-i*, and *-ur*, referring to the endings that these verbs take when conjugated in the first person singular present. Some Icelandic infinitives end with the *-ja* suffix, some with *á*, two with *u* (*munu*, *skulu*) one with *o* (*þvo*: "wash") and one with *e* (the Danish borrowing *ske* which is probably withdrawing its presence). Many transitive verbs (i.e. they require an object), can take a reflexive pronoun instead. The case of the pronoun depends on the case that the verb governs. As for further classification of verbs, Icelandic behaves much like other Germanic languages, with a main division between weak verbs and strong, and the strong verbs, of which there are about 150 to 200, are divided into six classes plus reduplicative verbs. They still make up some of the most frequently used verbs. (*Að vera*, "to be", is the example *par excellence*, having two subjunctives and two imperatives in addition to being made up of different stems.) There is also a class of auxiliary verbs, called the *-ri* verbs (4 or 5, depending who is counting) and then the oddity *að valda* ("to cause"), called the only totally irregular verb in Icelandic although every form of it is caused by common and regular sound changes.



Photograph taken from page 176 of *Colloquial Icelandic*

The basic word order in Icelandic is subject–verb–object. However, as words are heavily inflected, the word order is fairly flexible, and every combination may occur in poetry; SVO, SOV, VSO, VOS, OSV and OVS are all allowed for metrical purposes. However, as with most Germanic languages, Icelandic usually complies with the V2 word order restriction, so the conjugated verb in Icelandic usually appears as the second element in the clause, preceded by the word or phrase being emphasized. For example:

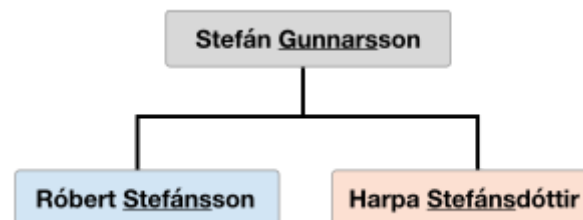
- *Ég veit það ekki.* (I know it not.)
- *Ekki veit ég það.* (Not know I it.)
- *Það veit ég ekki.* (It know I not.)
- *Ég fór til Bretlands þegar ég var eins árs.* (I went to Britain when I was one year old.)
- *Til Bretlands fór ég þegar ég var eins árs.* (To Britain went I, when I was one year old.)
- *Þegar ég var eins árs fór ég til Bretlands.* (When I was one year old, went I to Britain.)

In the above examples, the conjugated verbs *veit* and *fór* are always the second element in their respective clauses, see verb-second word order.

Vocabulary

Early Icelandic vocabulary was largely Old Norse.^[23] The introduction of Christianity to Iceland in the 11th century^[24] brought with it a need to describe new religious concepts. The majority of new words were taken from other Scandinavian languages; *kirkja* ("church"), for example. Numerous other languages have had their influence on Icelandic: French brought many words related to the court and knightship; words in the semantic field of trade and commerce have been borrowed from Low German because of trade connections. In the late 18th century, language purism began to gain noticeable ground in Iceland and since the early 19th century it has been the linguistic policy of the country (see linguistic purism in Icelandic).^[25] Nowadays, it is common practice to coin new compound words from Icelandic derivatives.

Icelandic personal names are patronymic (and sometimes matronymic) in that they reflect the immediate father or mother of the child and not the historic family lineage. This system—which was formerly used throughout the Nordic area and beyond—differs from most Western family name systems. In most Icelandic families, the ancient tradition of patronymics is still in use; i.e. a person uses her/his father's name (usually) or mother's name (increasingly in recent years) in the genitive form followed by the morpheme -son ("son") or -dóttir ("daughter") in lieu of family names.^[26]



A simple family tree showing the Icelandic patronymic naming system.



Eyjafjallajökull, one of the smaller ice caps of Iceland, situated to the north of *Skógar* and to the west of *Mýrdalsjökull*, is Icelandic for "glacier of *Eyjafjöll*", in turn "glacier of island mountain".

Language policy

A core theme of Icelandic language ideologies is grammatical, orthographic and lexical purism for Icelandic. This is evident in general language discourses, in polls, and in other investigations into Icelandic language attitudes.^[27] The general consensus on Icelandic language policy has come to mean that language policy and language ideology discourse are not predominantly state or elite driven; but rather, remain the concern of lay people and the general public.^[28] The Icelandic speech community is perceived to have a protectionist language culture;^[29] however, this is deep-rooted ideologically primarily in relation to the forms of the language, while Icelanders in general seem to be more “pragmatic” as to domains of language use.^[30]

Linguistic purism

During the 19th century, a movement was started by writers and other educated people of the country to rid the language of foreign words as much as possible and to create a new vocabulary and adapt the Icelandic language to the evolution of new concepts, thus avoiding the use of borrowed neologisms as are found in many other languages.^[31] Many old words which had fallen into disuse were recycled and given new senses in the modern language, and neologisms were created from Old Norse roots. For example, the word *rafmagn* ("electricity"), literally means "amber power", calquing the derivation of the Greek root "electr-" from Greek *elektron* ("amber").^[32] Similarly, the word *sími* ("telephone") originally meant "cord", and *tölva* ("computer") is a portmanteau of *tala* ("digit; number") and *völva* ("seeress").

Writing system

The Icelandic alphabet is notable for its retention of two old letters which no longer exist in the English alphabet: Þ, þ (*þorn*, modern English "thorn") and Ð, ð (*eð*, anglicised as "eth" or "edh"), representing the voiceless and voiced "th" sounds (as in English *thin* and *this*), respectively. The complete Icelandic alphabet is:

Majuscule forms (also called uppercase or capital letters)																															
A	Á	B	D	Ð	E	É	F	G	H	I	Í	J	K	L	M	N	O	Ó	P	R	S	T	U	Ú	V	X	Y	Ý	Þ	Æ	Ö
Minuscule forms (also called lowercase or small letters)																															
a	á	b	d	ð	e	é	f	g	h	i	í	j	k	l	m	n	o	ó	p	r	s	t	u	ú	v	x	y	ý	þ	æ	ö

The letters with diacritics, such as á and ö, are for the most part treated as separate letters and not variants of their derivative vowels. The letter é officially replaced *je* in 1929, although it had been used in early manuscripts (until the 14th century) and again periodically from the 18th century.^[33] The letter z, which had been a part of the Icelandic alphabet for a long time but was no longer distinguished from s in pronunciation, was officially removed in 1973.

Cognates with English

As Icelandic shares its ancestry with English and both are Germanic languages, there are many cognate words in both languages; each have the same or a similar meaning and are derived from a common root. The possessive, though not the plural, of a noun is often signified with the ending -s, as in English. Phonological and orthographical changes in each of the languages will have changed spelling and pronunciation. A few examples are given below.

English word	Icelandic word	Spoken comparison
apple	<i>epli</i>	 listen
book	<i>bók</i>	 listen
high/hair	<i>hár</i>	 listen
house	<i>hús</i>	 listen
mother	<i>móðir</i>	 listen
night	<i>nótt</i>	 listen
stone	<i>steinn</i>	 listen
that	<i>það</i>	 listen
word	<i>orð</i>	 listen

See also

- Basque–Icelandic pidgin (a *pidgin* that was used to trade with Basque whalers)
- Icelandic exonyms
- Icelandic literature
- Icelandic name

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Further reading

- *Icelandic: Grammar, Text and Glossary* (1945; 2000) by Stefán Einarsson. Johns Hopkins University Press, ISBN 9780801863578.

External links

- The Icelandic Language (<http://www.iceland.is/the-big-picture/people-society/language/>), an overview of the language from the Icelandic Ministry for Foreign Affairs.
- BBC Languages – Icelandic, with audio samples (https://www.bbc.co.uk/languages/european_languages/languages/icelandic.shtml)

- Icelandic: at once ancient and modern (<http://www.iceland.is/media/Utgafa/Icelandic.pdf>), a 16-page pamphlet with an overview of the language from the Icelandic Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2001.
- *The New World Translation of the Christian Greek Scriptures* in Icelandic (<https://www.jw.org/is/b%C3%B3kasafn/bibl%C3%ADa/bi12/b%C3%A6kur/>), the modern bible translation, published by Jehovah's Witnesses,^[1] both printed and online versions, 2019.
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 - Icelandic – English Dictionary (<https://web.archive.org/web/20040411012330/http://www.websters-online-dictionary.org/definition/Icelandic-english/>): from Webster's Rosetta Edition.
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